

Erna Wati – Musical Piety: Representation of Islam in Southeast Asia's Nasyid

MUSICAL PIETY: REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA'S NASYID BOY-BAND MUSIC

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ABSTRAK

Dalam beberapa dekade terakhir, gerakan Islamisasi di Malaysia dan Indonesia telah berkembang secara signifikan. Islam di Malaysia dan Indonesia dikenal dengan karakternya yang lebih moderat, lebih harmonis dan politik yang lebih beragam. Karakteristik tersebut dapat menyebabkan terjadinya penyebaran budaya populer secara global dan secara signifikan dapat mempengaruhi perkembangan budaya populer Islam dalam bidang sosial dan politik di kedua negara tersebut. Penelitian ini menganalisa kebangkitan Islam di dalam kehidupan sosial budaya dan politik masyarakat Malaysia dan Indonesia yang berfokus pada salah satu budaya populer Islam yaitu musik. Kemudian membandingkan ciri-ciri gerakan Islam Malaysia dan Islam Indonesia, serta menganalisa munculnya nasyid sebagai salah satu produk budaya populer Islam di Asia Tenggara. Tren tersebut menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan adaptasi budaya populer seperti boy-band musik nasyid di Malaysia dan Indonesia bervariasi sesuai dengan isu-isu yang mereka wakili. Hal itu dimungkinkan karena adanya pengaruh agenda ekonomi, politik dan budaya yang terlibat dalam perkembangannya.

Kata Kunci: *budaya populer, islamisasi, musik islami, nasyid*

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the movement of Islamisation in Malaysia and Indonesia have significantly developed. Islam in both Malaysia and Indonesia is known by its moderate character, more syncretised and politically diverse. These characteristics may have led the mass popular culture that globally spread, significantly influenced the rapid movement of Islamic popular culture in both countries. This paper analysed the rise of Islam in Malaysian and Indonesian society and politics, with a focus on Islamic popular culture. It then compared the characteristics of Malaysian Islam and Indonesian Islam movement and examine the rise of *nasyid* as one of Islamic popular culture products in Southeast Asia. The trends indicated that the success of popular culture adaptation such as *nasyid* boy-band music in Malaysia and Indonesia

vary in terms of the issues that they represent. It may influenced by the economic, political and cultural agenda which involve in it.

Keywords: popular culture, islamisation, islamic music, nasyid

BACKGROUND

The rising middle class in the contemporary Muslim in Malaysia and Indonesia is one of the success stories of development today. Different than its origin in the Middle East, Islam in both Malaysia and Indonesia is known by its moderate character, more syncretised and politically diverse. These characteristics may have led the mass popular culture that globally spread, significantly influenced the rapid movement of Islamic popular culture in both countries. The rapid development of Sharia banks, the diverse style of Muslim fashion, the massive publication of Islamic magazines and books, as well as the growth of Islamic cinema and music are an indication of the rising trend of Islamic popular culture, which can also be considered a byproduct of Islamisation and commodification practices in Malaysia and Indonesia.

In this paper, I will analyse the rise of Islam in Malaysian and Indonesian society and politics, with a focus on Islamic popular culture. I will then compare the characteristics of Malaysian Islam and Indonesian Islam movement and examine the rise of *nasyid* as one of Islamic popular culture products in Southeast Asia.

ISLAMISATION, COMMODIFICATION AND AMERICANISATION

In recent decades, the movement of Islamisation in Malaysia and Indonesia have significantly developed. Although the pattern of Islamisation has existed in the two countries since the first time Islam came to Southeast Asia, the Islamisation term has been popular together with the socio-political changes and a large number of scholars who enliven the research of Islamisation in Malaysia and Indonesia. In order to facilitate the research, some scholars have tried to interpret the term and related it as a part of commodification form. Mahmudi (2005 in Sasono, 2010: 49) defines Islamisation as the way of inviting people to strictly believe and act on the "Islamic teaching" and apply the principles of Islam to their daily life. In addition, Baker (in Sasono, 2010: 48) describes commodification as "a process whereby objects, qualities, and sign are turned into commodities whose prime purpose is for sale in the market place". Whilst Fealy (2008: 16-17) defines the commodification of Islam as the act of "commercialisation of Islam, or the turning of faith and its symbols into a commodity capable of being bought and sold for profit".

Moreover, since the global impacts of modernity has not chosen the recipients and “has not pushed the religions to the margin of social life” (Heryanto, 2011: 60), Islam comfortably welcomes the modernization to affiliate with it, especially for the young Muslims. “Unlike the established religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, which spread...in an ad hoc fashion, the founders of new religious movements...adopted a world focus from the outset” (Smith in Heryanto, 2011: 60). In short, different with the Islamisation in the past, Islamisation nowadays may be interpreted as the act of re-calling people to think, behave and express the principles of Islam by adopting the “commercialisation” strategies in its practice. However, the emergence of Islamisation in Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia does not instantly occur. Some experts, such as Heryanto (2011), analyse that there are some political and socio-cultural dimensions which have influenced the transformation of Southeast Asian Muslim life such as political Islam movements, the rising of the new Muslim middle class, and the rapid development of Islamic popular culture which realise or not also embody with Americanisation.

Strinati in his article *Mass Culture and Popular Culture* (1995) clearly depicts how American popular cultures influence the global consumption culture in order to gain mass profit through industrialisation. Strinati further explains why Americanisation has been considered as one of the harmful causes of today's popular culture as follows:

“...American popular culture is seen to embody all that is wrong with mass culture. Because mass culture is thought to arise from the mass production and consumption of cultural commodities, it is relatively easy to identify America as the home of mass culture since it is the capitalist society most closely associated with these processes. So much mass culture comes from America that if it is perceived as a threat then Americanisation becomes a threat as well. For critics of mass culture this represents a threat not just to aesthetic standards and cultural values, but to the national culture itself (Strinati, 1995: 22).”

Therefore, the emergence of Islamisation through Islamic popular culture in Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia potentially associated with Americanisation because some of the consumption processes are identified with hedonistic West.

MALAYSIAN AND INDONESIAN MUSLIM

After the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632, Islam became the new and dominant religion in the Arabian Peninsula. In the subsequent years after, Islam

spread rapidly throughout the sub-Saharan regions of Africa, as well as parts of Southeast Asia, including Malaysia and Indonesia archipelago. Although the debate about when Islam came to Malaysia and Indonesia archipelago (around 1200s to 1600s) for the first time and how the region was islamised still continues, it is believed that Islam successfully spread in Malaysia and Indonesia by Indian Muslims and various routes of trade (Ricklefs, 2005; Vaughn, 2005; Yusuf, 2006).

Although the countries have similar pattern of spreading Islam, they have different transformation in terms of the political and cultural influences. Malaysia is not an Islamic state although Islam is the official religion and practised by over half of its population where the majority of whom are Malays, Malaysia remains a secular state. This multiracial country consists of some ethnic such as Malay (50.4%), Chinese (23.7%), Indigenous group (11%), Indian (7.1%) and other ethnicities (7.8%), where almost “60% of them are Muslims, 19% Buddhist, 9% Christian, 6% Hindus and 6% other religions” (Raju, 2011: 47). It is very interesting knowing that Malaysia as a multicultural country but it prefers to constitute the country to be a secular and Islamic state in the same time.

There is confusion on the subject as Malaysia's law and jurisprudence is based on the English common law, meanwhile Sharia law is also applicable to Malaysian Muslim and openly applied in most Malaysian daily lifestyle (Sooi Beng, 2007). This condition probably as a result of the previous Islamisation processes in Malaysia. In the past, Islamisation in Malaysia was conducted by *raja* or *sultan* (king). The *raja* or *sultan* became preeminent spiritual leader and defender of the faith, and responsible for the transmission and implementation of Islamic law (Nagata, 2004). Although Malaysia has seen massive social change since its independence from the British colonial in 1957, Islam remains still has power and rules the culture.

What is more, with the internal diversity that it has, it is hard to believe that “identity politics play a crucial role in the modern nation” (Sarkissian 2005: 125) like Malaysia. Malaysian citizens are identified by their racial categories such as *Bumiputera* (Malay person who is Muslim), Chinese, Indian and other (Sarkissian, 2005; Raju, 2011). Apart from this, the increasing visibility of Islamic symbols and content in the contemporary Malaysia popular culture indicates that Islam still rules the modern Malaysia today.

Different than Islam in Malaysia, Islam in Indonesia has more complex movements. During the colonial era, when Indonesians struggled politically and militarily against the Dutch colonists, Indonesian Muslims exploited Islamic organizations to motivate and organise Muslims to rebel against the Dutch (Abdullah and Hisyam, 2003). One such example can be seen in Sarekat Islam. After Indonesian independence was established in 1945, under the guidance of

Soekarno, Indonesian Muslim movements transformed into political practices which were heralded by the establishment of Islamic political parties like *Masyumi*, *Partai Syarikat Islam Indonesia (PSII)*, *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Partai Islam Perti* (Abdullah and Hisyam, 2003; Ricklefs, 2005). While under the control of the Soeharto regime, Islamic parties politically and economically lost their support which led to a shift in their activities from political practices to Islamic proselytization movements affiliated with organizations such as *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama* (Ricklefs, 2005). The shifting orientation of Indonesian Muslim movements in post-authoritarian rule still continues today and can be identified by the resurgence of political Islam and the emergence of Islamic popular culture in Indonesia. The *Reformasi* era contributed to the freedom of expressing and reflecting Islam contemporarily in everyday lifestyles.

AL ARQAM, TARBIYAH AND THE DEVELOPING OF NASYID BOY-BAND

The term *nasyid* originates from Arabic word *annasyid*, which means song, hymn, anthem, poetry or singer of a religious song (Sarkissian, 2005; Barendregt, 2006 and 2011). Barendregt further explains that *nasyid* also considers as “an a-cappella song genre that mainly uses vocal harmonies and is predominantly performed by male vocalist” (2006: 10). It is also believed that *nasyid* already sung and performed by the people of Medina when Prophet Muhammad first came from Mecca to Medina as a greeting and has been popular as an Islamic song titled *Tola'al Badru 'Alaina* (finally the moon has risen amidst us) (Barendregt, 2006; Sooi Beng, 2007).

Nasyid was brought home and introduced by Malaysian and Indonesian students who studied in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait and Jordan (Sarkissian, 2005; Barendregt, 2006 and 2011). It gained its earlier popularity in Malaysia around 1980s and was pioneered by Al Arqam activists. Al Arqam was an Islamic organisation which led by Malaysian civil group and had missionary (*dakwah*) agenda to introduce Islamic value in their life. Beside organised the *dakwah*, they also built an Islamic economy system by producing their own Islamic products, including *nasyid* for their musical group. The first *nasyid* group that organized by Al Arqam was *Nada Murni* (Nobel Rhythm) which later followed by the *Zikr* and *Rabbani*. These *nasyid* groups surprisingly achieved their success as the lyric's contents not only referenced “jihad, martyrdom and heroism” but also “touches upon social issues including drugs, finishing school” (Barendregt, 2011: 236–237), loving parents and family and “other matters which occupy the minds of adults but recognizable to younger audiences” (Barendregt, 2011: 237). Therefore, most of the followers of *nasyid* were identified as youth people, especially students

and activist in religious colleges and universities. Soon the popularity of the *nasyid* boy-bands spread to neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Brunei, Philippines, Singapore and especially Indonesia.

In Indonesia, *nasyid* was introduced in 1990s and more popular through the *dakwah* group called *Tarbiyah*. *Tarbiyah* is an Islamic organisation that “both in form and context is inspired by the teachings of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood” group (Barendregt, 2011: 239). Barendregt further depicts the process and the system of the spread of *nasyid* in Indonesia as follows:

“...the popularity of *nasyid* had also spread to Indonesia, where it scored huge successes in cities with large students communities including Jakarta, Yogyakarta and especially in Bandung, where scores of *nasyid* ensembles blossomed. At the stage there were no official channels of distribution in Indonesia; *nasyid* music was spread via home-produced cassettes, circulated (as they often still are) among university and secondary school students, or for sale at Islamic book fairs (Barendregt, 2011: 239).”

It can be indicated that the system of the spread of *nasyid* in Malaysia and Indonesia have similar pattern where college and university activists have become the agents to distribute this Islamic music. However, Malaysian and Indonesian *nasyid* genre has developed and changed in order to meet the different preferences of the audiences. This point clearly explained by Barendregt: “Some argue that *nasyid* is merely a fashion, and while its adherents understandably want to emphasize its long tradition and religious roots or political overtones, *nasyid* is clearly subject to an ongoing process of evolution or, at least, change.” (2006: 177). In Malaysia, one of the most popular *nasyid* artists, Raihan, has begun to experiment with crossovers music such as hip-hop and R&B. Some of them influenced by the success of western boy bands such as *Boys II Men*, *Back Street Boys*, or *Westlife* (Barendregt, 2006 and 2011). While the *nasyid* groups in Indonesia have more varieties in terms of the genre such as heroic music by *Izzatul Islam* and *Shotul Haroqah*, and pop music like *Snada*.

As the popularity of *nasyid* has risen up, the *nasyid* boy-bands have gained the superstar status, performing regularly on radio (especially in Ramadhan) and television. In the same time, the song contest modelled on the program *American Idol*, *Festival Nasyid Indonesia*, has led *nasyid* as one of the television programs that receive great enthusiasm and are often worshiped by largely female audiences. As a result, some argue that these new style of Islamic popular culture are equivalent with the western popular culture that show blatant commercialism.

In addition, the success of *nasyid* boy-bands introducing a new concept of music to the media electronic audiences attracted some famous Indonesian boy

bands to produce another Islamic music labelled “*Album Religi*” (Religious Album). Surprisingly, Islamic music content that introduced by boy bands such as *Gigi*, *Ungu* and *Wali band* gained positive feedbacks from the public. As consequences, *nasyid* boy-bands in Indonesia are struggled to attract and gain the public attention. This condition is contradictory with what Malaysian *nasyid* boy-bands experienced. *Nasyid* music in Malaysia has its own place and audiences although the famous singer in Malaysia such as Siti Nurhaliza also sings some songs with the Islamic symbols and contents (Barendregt, 2006). It seems commodification and consumerism culture appears in Southeast Asia countries with different reactions and impacts.

CONCLUSION

The significant movement of Islamisation in Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia influences the transformation of the Muslim life such as the political Islam movements, the rising of the new Muslim middle class, and the rapid development of Islamic popular culture. The rapid development then influenced the culture and Muslim life-style by representing the Islamic symbol through popular culture product such as music.

The trends indicate that the success of popular culture adaptation such as *nasyid* boy-band music in Malaysia and Indonesia vary in terms of the issues that they represent. It may be influenced by the economic, political and cultural agenda which involve in it. Furthermore, it also indicates that the process of Islamisation through commodification in both countries is not a simple process and still be a debatable issue.

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